

Investing Marine Intelligence Capital in MARSOC: Are the Rewards
worth the Risks to the USMC?

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The establishment in 2005 of a Marine component of United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) provided the Corps additional opportunities to contribute to the war on terrorism, but at considerable cost to mission effectiveness. Unfortunately, the U.S. Marine Corps' (USMC) capabilities were diminished by the creation of that component, the Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC). Established to support USSOCOM, MARSOC will cost the USMC many intelligence professionals, in addition to force reconnaissance operators and other high demand specialties.¹ The quantity of intelligence officers ordered to MARSOC will negatively impact the Marine Corps' conduct of its missions by establishing a separate intelligence community that exacerbates manning shortfalls and diminishes the expertise base of the average intelligence officer.

Background

The United States Army, Air Force, and Navy have participated in USSOCOM since its inception in 1987. The Marine Commandant at the time resisted pressure to contribute forces to the new command. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) attributed this decision to the USMC's "...need to retain the flexibility needed to perform its missions."² The USMC has always considered itself an elite service.³

Admittedly, no combatant command has been stretched further in the war on terrorism than USSOCOM, which deployed forces at a rate never before experienced.⁴ USSOCOM's current operational tempo cannot be maintained indefinitely and is compounded because none of the services can meet their own special operations personnel accession goals. In 2005, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld addressed the personnel shortages by directing the USMC and USSOCOM to plan for the integration of a Marine service component.⁵ Rumsfeld believed bolstering USSOCOM was worth relieving the USMC of its best Marines. USSOCOM gained highly trained personnel to conduct vital missions and permitted longer dwell time. Unfortunately, the longer term implications to the USMC were not carefully considered.

Exacerbates manning shortfalls

Force structure

Prior to MARSOC, the USMC provided only 26 (approximate) intelligence officers to special operations billets (including USSOCOM, JFCOM, and DIA).⁶ When establishment is complete in 2008, the USMC will have detailed approximately 2,600 of its best trained Marines, including many specialists in intelligence, communications, and linguistics to work for MARSOC.⁷ Each of nine Marine Special Operations Companies will contain an intelligence cell.⁸ HQMC anticipates that 25-30

intelligence officers will be assigned to MARSOC to provide organic intelligence analysis. The USMC is currently unable to support this number and is exploring solutions to increase the base. Nevertheless, the exact number of intelligence officers required by MARSOC are uncertain because, according to the GAO, USSOCOM "...has not yet fully identified the force structure needed to perform its assigned missions" as of 26 Nov 2007.⁹

Stretching manpower

Manpower and retention challenges will result from detailing intelligence officers to MARSOC. Similar to other services, officers may report dissatisfaction at returning to the "conventional" force or seek civilian employment or discharge due to operational tempo. The fact that MARSOC intelligence officers are not currently eligible for bonuses their other service USSOCOM counterparts receive may accelerate MARSOC officers' departures to other service branches.

The increase of MARSOC billets stretches an already stressed pool of MOS 0200 (intelligence) officers. In the current environment, many intelligence officers achieve less than a 1:1 dwell time ratio, deploying more frequently than their colleagues in other specialties. Retention amongst Intel officers (all ranks) is down to 85.64% in 2007 from 89.05% in 2002, according to MMOA.¹⁰ This has led to deficiencies in the

supply of intelligence officers. Moreover, when the economy improves, retention figures will worsen.

The answer to MARSOC's requirement was to increase intelligence officer accessions to accommodate increased demand. This solution cannot be fully implemented in a year, however. Increasing the number of company grade intelligence officers by three fold will take years to accomplish. Further, the size of the intelligence community will grow, demand will also rise. The USMC will, out of necessity actually fill fewer conventional intelligence billets, arguably with lower performing officers.

Diminishes the expertise base

Best and brightest

Detailing intelligence officers to MARSOC established an elite intelligence community of Marines. Despite MARSOC Commanding General Maj. Gen. Hejlik's philosophy that MARSOC Marines will continue to observe the same standards to which regular Marines adhere, intra-service competition, institutional rivalry, and cultural distrust between "special" and "conventional" forces that affect other services will undoubtedly also affect Marines.¹¹ This schism is already an unfortunate reality within the U.S. Army intelligence community and a similar divide will occur within the USMC. Concern over

grooming standards presents a minor concern. A larger concern exists that MARSOC Marines will forget their roots and the organization to which they will return.

The fear is that MARSOC will attract the highest performing Marine intelligence officers and the perception will be that the conventional USMC will retain lesser performing individuals. The secretive special operations selection process will serve to attract the most ambitious intelligence professionals. The second order effect is that commanders will possess less confidence in intelligence officers who have not been selected for MARSOC.

Tour duration

Marine Manpower Officer Assignments office (MMOA) projects that standard tours for intelligence officers at MARSOC will be 60 months in duration.¹² The standard for permanent change of station (PCS) orders is 36 months, but Marines are eligible to request orders after serving 24 months in a location. GAO stated that official policy provided by HQMC is that assignments to MARSOC intelligence positions will be for 48 months.¹³ With tour lengths approaching a fourth of a Marine's career and dim prospects that Marines will return to the conventional force, what the USMC gains from these officers is questionable.

Perhaps a greater concern is the tour duration of MARSOC intelligence officers. Asked in April 2007 whether MARSOC will be a temporary stop or a career move for Marines, Maj. Gen. Hejlik, said:

It will be case by case, and I've discussed this with the Marine Corps. We will have invested a lot of money and time to give some Marines the experience, maturity, and judgment they need. Their skills could atrophy...if they returned to mother Marine Corps, as we call it. So there will be some Marines who spend the majority of their careers in MARSOC. We're still working this out. But if a Marine does come out of MARSOC, he may get orders to work in one of the theatre special operations commands, in Special Operations Command, or in Plans, Policy, and Operations in HQMC. ...a Marine with a tour here at MARSOC will have an identifier. He will probably spend a tour out there and then come right back into MARSOC.¹⁴

This seems to indicate that an officer seeking assignment at MARSOC will likely not return to the conventional USMC. When he is between MARSOC tours, he will be assigned a billet within the special ops community. Hejlik's position is clear that the conventional USMC probably will not employ this Marine again.

Career management plan

The GAO also found that neither USSOCOM nor USMC have fully identified the required force structure or established a strategic approach to managing these critical intelligence skills. Essentially, no career management plan exists for personnel in MARSOC.¹⁵ MMOA is uncertain about the proper career progression for intelligence officers assigned to MARSOC.¹⁶ The

'case-by-case' approach presents enormous problems for career management and underscores the career uncertainty associated with assignment to MARSOC. A separate career model for MARSOC intelligence officers appears inevitable.

Expertise

The rapid increase of Intel officer accessions will actually decrease the experience base of the next generation of intelligence officers. The expansion is inordinately weighted toward company grade officers, due to expansion of intelligence units and billets in the infantry battalions.¹⁷ The increase in company grade officers occurs without a corresponding increase in field grade officer positions. The larger base of company grade intelligence officers in the conventional force demands more be provided to the supporting establishment assignments (such as recruiting), which arguably do not augment an intelligence officer's specialist expertise.

Consequently, officer turnover in the intelligence and radio battalions will be accelerated. Shorter tour lengths will be necessary to cycle in the larger population of intelligence officers to get on the job training in these battalions. Accordingly, average time spent in operational billets relevant to intelligence officers' specialties will decrease markedly, according to MMOA, with first tours at Radio Bn or Intel Bn to

last 24 months.¹⁸ With shorter tours, fewer deployments, and time in the MOS, the knowledge base of the community will be reduced as a whole.

Counterarguments

Several arguments assert that MARSOC benefits the Corps. These arguments focus on the promise of increased training available to USMC personnel. MARSOC proponents assert that intelligence officers will receive better training operating with MARSOC than with "conventional" Marine forces. Further, intelligence officers will become more adept at supporting conventional Marine Corps operations from their experiences at MARSOC. This assertion implies that integrating Marine intelligence officers into USSOCOM will yield closer relations with the special ops community.

Admittedly, closer relationships will result in additional opportunities to employ Marine forces in support of SOCOM missions, but not necessarily employment of USSOCOM capabilities in support of Marine air-ground Task Force (MAGTF) commanders. Maj. Gen. Hejlik clarified command relationships of MARSOC units in *Sea Power* in which he stated "When the Special Operations Companies deploy, they are under the operational control of the theater special operations commander." Even Marine special ops

units will not be attached to MAGTFs.¹⁹ The bottom line is that the MAGTF will not gain from the arrangement.

In addition, proponents suggest that Marine intelligence officers receive higher quality training from venues within USSOCOM. Maj. Gen. Hejlik, in his interview with *Sea Power*, identified that Marines will provide a "higher trained officer who will obviously help bring [his] new units to a higher standard."²⁰ These MARSOC intelligence officers will be trained to a level mandated by USSOCOM to operate professionally within the component, which is necessary to ensure uniformity across USSOCOM. More tenuous, however, is the suggestion that time spent at MARSOC enables an intelligence officer to perform significantly better upon return to the conventional force. The Marine may not return to the Corps and USSOCOM training is not necessarily relevant to the USMC. Training is perishable; and whether special operations skills can be utilized in the MAGTF is questionable. Maj. Gen. Hejlik, in fact admitted such skills could atrophy.²¹

Finally, intelligence officers who return will possess a better understanding of USSOCOM operations. Unfortunately, this understanding will not necessarily minimize internal friction, infighting, and cultural jealousy resulting between MARSOC and USMC. Based on Maj. Gen. Hejlik's statements and absent a

career management plan for intelligence officers at MARSOC, many intelligence officers may not return to the conventional force. In fact, if the USMC remains in a supporting role to USSOCOM, the USMC stands to gain little from MARSOC. The role of the USMC is viable in the foreseeable future and the wisdom of diluting the Corps' cadre of intelligence officers is doubtful.

Conclusion

MARSOC was created to relieve a stretched USSOCOM. Secretary Rumsfeld prioritized USSOCOM's mission above that of the Marine Corps. Creating MARSOC caused problems which will profoundly affect the intelligence community of the USMC. MARSOC will stretch USMC intelligence resources, especially intelligence officers at a time when the USMC already finds it difficult to retain the best intelligence professionals. The MAGTF requires timely, accurate, and actionable intelligence to drive operations, and MARSOC will weaken the Marine Corps as a whole.

Word Count 1,890

Notes

1. Harold Kennedy, "Reshaping the Force," *National Defense*, March (2006): 46.

2. Government Accountability Office, "SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES: Management Actions Are Needed to Effectively Integrate Marine Corps Forces into the U.S. Special Operations Command," 26 November (2007): 1.

3. Kennedy, 47.

4. Otto Kreisher, "The USMC-SOCOM Connection," *Sea Power*, 1 March (2003): 45.

5. GAO (2007), 2.

6. Capt Daniel C. McBride, personal email "RE: CI Questions for Monitor/Occupational Field Sponsor," 7 December (2007): 1.

7. GAO (2007), 2.

8. Matt Hillburn, "Marine Special Ops," *Sea Power*, 1 April 2007: 71.

9. GAO (2007), 5.

10. McBride, 2.

11. Hillburn, 71.

12. McBride, 2.

13. GAO (2007), 22-23.

14. Hillburn, 71.

15. GAO (2007), 5.

16. McBride, 2.

17. McBride, 2.

18. Capt Daniel C. McBride, "MMOA Road show briefing to Expeditionary Warfare School intelligence and communication students." 9 August 2007.

19. Hillburn, 71.

20. Hillburn, 71.

21. Hillburn, 71.

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